

# *Implementation of international norms in Russia: the case of higher education*

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## Implementation of International Norms in Russia: The Case of Higher Education

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**Abstract.** This article analyses the reasons why Russia adopts foreign norms in the sphere of higher education, looking at how isomorphism, Transnational Advocacy Networks and the global market for education have brought about the country's integration in the global network of universities. It investigates how Russia strives to adopt international and western educational norms by adhering to the Bologna process and launching projects such as 5-100 to reinforce the competitiveness of its universities on the global stage, but remains concerned about security and national identity issues. These fears have resulted in the government prioritizing the adherence to formal criteria while preserving the historical content of its higher education, thus leading to a dichotomy between substance and structure. This mismatch between the organization of higher education and its content leads to an ineffective implementation of international norms but also to significant disruptions in the existing system. Attempts to levy the advantages of both systems have had opposite results. Indeed, the risks of sudden change are multifold: the sudden “catch-up” mode leads to resistance and to a decline in the overall quality of education in those universities lacking the institutions to support the fast tempo of change. The authors outline the benefits of an incremental adaptation to the international higher education system and the need to adjust international norms to local conditions, by building off the assets of the country's Soviet heritage. The benefits of involving Transnational Experience and Experience Networks in the implementation of international norms are also reviewed.

**Keywords:** Russian higher education, Isomorphism, Transnational Advocacy Networks, Transnational Expertise and Experience Networks, Securitization, Normative Enclaves

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### Introduction

The Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, one of the first academic institutions in Russia, was inaugurated in 1724 at Peter the Great's initiative to perform research and develop education in line with the West European standards of the day (the establishment of the country's earliest university followed shortly after, in 1755). This new, externally inspired arrangement has had enduring consequences for the ways education and science have since been managed in Russia. It laid down the foundation for the modern-style national scholarly community, which has endured to this day with only minor modifications: the prestige of the national academia institution is still extremely high in spite of all the talk of its irrelevance [1–3]. Back then, the newly established system was a top-down model of control and stimulation, aimed at providing a technical and scientific resource base for the State's competitive participation in the newly formed European balance of power, to which Russia – upon its triumph in the Northern war over Sweden (1700–1721) and its self-proclamation as an Empire (i.e. wielding the ultimate sovereignty) was a full-fledged party. This was a timely and politically driven move drawing upon deep appreciation by the Russian political class of the close nexus between a country's research level and State's overall power capacity.

300 years on, Russia's "5-100 project", launched in May 2013<sup>1</sup> to maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global academic domain, shares a number of strikingly similar characteristics with Peter the Great's vision. The project appears to bear out: (1) the persisting top-down approach to structuring higher education; (2) the heavy reliance on the transplantation of organizational norms originating in the West; and (3) the desire to fit into, and successfully compete in the international system in line with its pre-existing rules, criteria and practices.

The Russian leadership's unspoken commitment to de-facto joining the Western realm of advanced university-based research and following its rules is comprehensible in its intent, but on the outside, it seems to be rupturing the centuries' long tradition of basic and applied research confined to the national academy, still deeply engrained despite all the efforts to put a stop to it (the reform of the Russian Academy of Sciences). But the unmistakable resemblance of the approach begs the question why the government relies on foreign structures and norms in the sphere of education, thus unconditionally acknowledging its superiority and the need to reconstitute our domestic structures accordingly.

From quite early on, the country has enjoyed a robust and perfectly competitive academic capacity of its own: the Academy not long after its creation achieved scientific results, which could rival those of its European counterparts [4]. Furthermore, in the Soviet era, numerous ground-breaking scientific achievements among which the launch of the Sputnik in 1957 demonstrated that the Soviet Union had cutting-edge research with a spill-over effect in the sphere of education. The Soviet organizational structure in education was highly centralized and controlled, whereas the substance of what was taught was rich and diverse. Most importantly, the structure and the substance of the Soviet education were perfectly harmonized and aligned with one another.

True, Russia's current aspiration to import Western norms can be accounted for by the fact that the government distanced itself in the 1990s from the Soviet system and wishes to implement more flexible and international educational structures. It is surprising, however, that Russia has chosen to borrow Western norms without giving much consideration to, or even openly debating, their local applicability. This is especially remarkable, considering that amongst government officials, business representatives and the population at large, anti-western sentiment is running high [5]. In other words, the puzzling question here

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation № 599, «On measures to realize state policy in the sphere of education and science».

is: why has Russia, for all its vehement anti-Western rhetoric and a stunning record of Soviet research and education practices, opted for a blanket adoption of Western norms and practices?

The origins of this process, that is the initial phase of this paradox, can be easily explained. The 1990s was a peculiar time defined by a harsh rejection of the Soviet type ideologically driven mode of education and the active involvement of foreign actors and foreign standards in the Russian educational system. During that period, attempts were made to revise the content, priorities and the general trajectory of education and research, but the long-term impact of those initial tendencies turned out to be limited and incomplete as the economic recovery was picking up pace in the 2000s, bringing new ideological concepts to the fore of public life.

Based on a study of the evolution of educational programs, the authors concluded that the content of education in Social Sciences in Russia – in terms of its content, didactics, methodology, and theory based approaches, has been mostly stagnant, while its outside contours and organizational design appear to be subjected to continuous external influence and, hence, are experiencing unending alterations. One of the objectives of the article is to determine why a gaping dichotomy persists between content and structure in education, with the former showing resilience and the latter forever evolving under a continuous external influence. The primary driver behind this dynamic is that while educational structure is considered as a contingent variable or even, for some, a formality; the substance of education, on the contrary, is a matter of national security.

Applying the theoretical concept of isomorphism as developed by institutional theory to the Russian case provides valuable insights into why Russia depends so heavily on educational structures and norms emanating from the West. Transnational Advocacy Networks (TAN) champion and help promote Western educational norms by emphasizing the need to partake in the globalization process and the

risks of being an outsider when most developed countries have embraced clear integration policies in research and education (the most prominent of which being the Bologna Process). These frameworks reveal the mechanisms affecting norm transfer and adoption but do not fully explain the gaps in implementation and the contradictions between the government's rhetoric and actions.

A study of the Russian (and Soviet) and Western education paradigms also reveals the limits to the common perspective that the former was centralized and directly subordinated to the needs of a centrally planned economy while the latter is autonomous and innovative [6]. Beyond the fact that history is written by the winner, we notice that the pressure the authorities had on the Soviet education system, pushing it to fulfill the needs of the economy, currently impacts the European paradigm in the same way with the European Commission openly stating via the Bologna Process that it wants to create "the most competitive knowledge-based economy"<sup>2</sup> (EC, 2003). Some scholars underline the fact that the business logic, isomorphism and European educational integration process are depriving EU universities of their independence and creativity [7].

This article reviews the nature and limits of borrowing norms from foreign countries, then considers a dichotomy between the substance and the structure of Russian education and how it can be explained by national security concerns, and finally analyses the impact of the changes of the 1990s on the implementation of educational norms in Russia.

### **What Transnational Advocacy Networks and Isomorphism can explain and what they cannot**

A government's decision to adopt international or foreign norms calls for an explanation. This is particularly the case when relations be-

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<sup>2</sup> Third European Report on Science & Technology Indicators 2003. URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/research/press/2003/pdf/indicators2003/reist\\_2003.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/press/2003/pdf/indicators2003/reist_2003.pdf)

tween the countries promoting the norms and the countries adopting them are strained. In Russia, anti-Western sentiment is high against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis, Syria and the sanctions, yet this has had little to no impact on the process of adoption of Western educational norms, which is in full swing. This sort of mimetic behavior has been widely studied in scholarly literature. There are a number of reasons why similar norms and structures are in place in different countries. Much has been written about the impact of globalization and the power of the market in determining the structure of various national bodies. Constructivist theory appears as the most promising framework to explain social change and the role different actors play in creating and diffusing norms.

National governments do not have their hands free when legislating and elaborating normative frameworks and targets. There is a lot of “lobbying” coming from all directions, and all the more so with globalization and regional integration processes. K. Sikkink and M. Keck [8] in searching for a way to qualify this combined pressure from a multitude of various actors and levels on national governments, coined the expression Transnational Advocacy Networks. TANs are networks who exchange information and communicate without a hierarchical structure and involve different types of actors. They impact a national government’s policy-making in a myriad of ways, regardless of whether the government itself is open to this influence or resists it (“boomerang effect” whereby activists in a country put pressure on their government by involving other international actors). This approach explains the pressure exerted on national governments by different level actors to conform to a process going on elsewhere. By appropriately framing educational issues, transnational activists – including leading local universities – make governments more sensitive to the importance of participating in the integrated educational systems, regional or global. The costs for a national education system of being

marginalized in the global arena are presented as very high. With regards to higher education, the discourse chiefly revolves around the consequences of an economic nature.

The notion of “advocacy” and the focus on “pressure” put on a government by, amongst others, external actors, are useful for appreciating Russia’s situation in education in the 1990s, but generally work best with more salient subjects or causes such as human rights. Russia’s current independence and concern for its sovereignty coupled with the fact that education is not a highly politicized issue in the international arena make the use of the “boomerang effect” unlikely and TANs in the education sector operate mainly at the intergovernmental level and influence through expert and university communities. The notion of Transnational Expertise and Experience Networks (TEENs) was introduced to emphasize a different role played by transnational networks [9]. TEENs are essential not in bringing pressure to bear on a national government so much as in helping to adapt international norms to a given national context and making all levels sensitive to why and how a norm should be implemented.

In this light, within Institutional Theory, J. Meyer and B. Rowan [10] looked into the reasons for why structures and norms are similar in seemingly unrelated places or spheres. They determined that new structures are designed based on existing ones to try to gain “organizational legitimacy” because conforming to the predominant rules of the international system is necessary for survival [10]. P. DiMaggio and W. Powell came up with the term isomorphism in social sciences (“two distinct institutions which do not resemble each other”) [11]. The term is borrowed from the natural sciences and originally qualifies the resemblance between two unrelated structures (for example, the expansion of cities follows the same pattern as the growth of clouds). Isomorphic mimicry qualifies a situation when an organism copies a feature of another one which results in an evolutionary advantage such as an edible species of butterfly that look like another so as not to get eaten

[12]. Yet, used in social sciences, it frequently has the opposite connotation and refers to unproductive imitation. The most shocking illustration of uncritical isomorphism may be what is sometimes referred to as cargo cults, when local tribes of the South Pacific made pretend airplanes, towers and runways to attract planes with cargo as they had seen in the Second World War<sup>3</sup>. Copying the structure did not lead to the expected result and no planes landed in these “make believe” airports.

P. DiMaggio and W. Powell distinguished between different types of isomorphism, which explain how institutional systems become more alike: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism, which all exist alongside competitive isomorphism [11]. Competitive isomorphism is linked to market pressures to improve one's economic position [13]. Coercive isomorphism is the result of formal and informal influence from other organizations [11]: international organizations such as the World Bank promote educational programs that have universal targets but lead to the homogenization of educational structures worldwide. Normative isomorphism comes from professionalization and establishing general norms to facilitate working processes [11]: for example, international companies choose to recruit employees who have received a standard education from similar backgrounds to increase the chances they will fit in and rapidly become operational. Mimetic isomorphism [11] is most common when there is a void and it is easier to copy an existing structure, which seems to work well elsewhere, than to design your own. Russia in the 1990s was experiencing a void in its secondary educational system and faced a number of serious issues such as corruption and the need to offer equal chances to students all over the country. The government used the American SATs as a model and implemented what began as a similar set of tests used to assess all school-leavers in view of their accession to uni-

versity. Importing provides legitimacy and when a country is considering something as important as a complete overhaul of its educational system, the government needs to convince all parties involved in the decision-making process that the new model works better than the previous one. Consulting companies, by modeling and promoting “best practices”, play an important role in this form of structural homogenization. The degree to which a structure or country is influenced by isomorphic change depends on a number of hypothesis formulated as follows by P. DiMaggio and B. Powell [11], which we will use to shed light on the case of education in Russia. 1) The more an organization depends on another one, the more likely it is to copy that organization's structure. Russia needed the World Bank's funds for its educational system and the organization granted the loans to Russia under the condition that its recommendations were taken into account during the restructuring process, which led to standardization. 2) The greater the interaction with the state and the greater the centralization of resources, the more sensitive a structure is to isomorphic change. The vast majority of Russian schools and universities are state funded, which means they end up being similar to each other. Universities are also in competition in the modernization process and the most successful end up being copied by the remainder. 3) Uncertainty and goal ambiguity are closely associated with isomorphic change. The liberalization of the Russian economy led to a vacuum in education and the need to create something new, which was achieved by imitating models from abroad. These parameters offer some explanations of why Russia in its recent history copied foreign structures and norms.

Specifically, regarding the sphere of education, the existing literature places an emphasis on the role played by international organizations in promoting change, which leads to a homogenization of structures and processes. This is especially the case in developing countries, who, for funding and organizational reasons, are more sensitive to their policies. To illustrate the fact that external forces have an impact on

<sup>3</sup> New World Encyclopedia: “Cargo Cult”. URL: [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cargo\\_cult](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cargo_cult)



structures within a state, M. Finnemore conducted a study on the emergence of national science bureaucracies and concluded that they present surprising similarities because they were inspired by UNESCO [14]. The organization not only puts on the agenda the question of creating science policy bureaucracies but its employees also designed a model structure which inspired most countries, hence proving that demand-driven theories regarding the emergence of such administrative bodies were not pertinent.

One study of national education systems [15] revealed a tendency of convergence in different countries' curricula and organizational structures, with an evolution toward a similar set of subjects being taught and even to a similar amount of time being devoted to them. The professionalization of teachers, educated worldwide with the same programs and studying the same theories (Piaget, Bourdieu, etc.) gives them similar background knowledge, which they draw upon in the classroom [15]. A comparative study of education systems in the 1970s discovered that Sub-Saharan African countries had school programs and structures which were quite similar to Western ones in spite of the fact that the labor market demands were very different [16]. This convergence is not optimal as the local system in this case does not prepare children for their likely future professions and rather encourages a brain drain of the most able amongst them.

The theoretical frameworks considered above explain why structures often become similar by interacting with each other and so as to be able to work together efficiently, but they do not explain why it is that isomorphism could exist in intent (the state borrowing norms) but not exists in rhetoric (the state does not admit to borrowing norms) or in practice (the norms are not implemented). Recent studies, which reviewed why development programs are not always successful, have highlighted the limits of donor-assisted programs promoting education in developing countries by creating formal institutions [12]. While funds are provided to modernize education, sometimes the imple-

mentation ability of the state is limited, a situation described as a "capability trap" if the state "is engaged in an internal and international logic of development and fail[s] to acquire capability" [17]. "Insincere mimicry" is another of the causes for the lack of implementation, with governments pretending to implement reforms and performing formalities instead of actually reforming [12]. Yet, these explanations work best in the case of developing countries with no pre-existing educational systems, but do not fully explain the issues related to a country with a developed educational system such as Russia. International norms and structures have been formally adopted in Russia but they have not been fully implemented in their spirit and do not for that reason yield the expected results. Russia does not practice "insincere mimicry" it would seem, because the political discourse of the government does not try to convince its neighbors that it complies with their norms, nor do the authorities publicize the fact that they borrow western norms. As for the educational reform, Russia does not appear strictly speaking to be stuck in a "capability trap" as the country has a strong centralized bureaucracy capable of effecting the necessary changes. This article further analyses the fact that while Western norms are implemented in order for the country to be able to participate in internationalization, they lead to few changes in the content of education because of the uncertainty regarding the need for such changes and because education is increasingly subject to securitization.

### **The dichotomy between Structure and Substance in the Russian case**

How states respond to globalization and regional integration depends on internal, external, and historical factors. Two parallel education models have been identified: one of them, which is characteristic of the USA and Western Europe, is related to the post-sovereign project of creating a merit-based universities' system with intensive international mobility and a universal culture, and the other one, in which the



state plays a key role in creating identities, and which is just as, if not more, widespread [18]. Countries traditionally belonging in the second category are opening up their higher education systems to embrace, at least partially, the former model in order to be active members of the international community. Indeed, while many countries are concerned about their sovereignty in the face of globalization and integration processes, yet it is not economically viable or feasible to sever contacts with the rest of the world. Each country has to discover for itself what it is willing to internationalize versus what it would rather shield from outside influence. A number of countries of the European Union decided to give up on their national currency but not on their national defense systems. In the sphere of education, a distinction can be made between the structure of education and its substance.

While structure relates to how a system is organized, to the way it is divided into parts and how these parts interact between each other and with outside entities, substance is the content of the system and also the reason it exists. The structure of education is how the learning process is split between primary, secondary, and higher education, the type of examinations used to test student knowledge, the rules to access university, the types of funding used (state or private) and the degree of autonomy of educational institutions and teaching staff. The structure and substance of education traditionally develop in parallel with the former serving the latter. An illuminating example would be the Jules Ferry laws in France which made primary schooling free, compulsory and secular (*structure*) in order to ensure the French population which would be patriotic, democratic and speak French (*substance*). These measures were the result of a victory against the monarchist right, part of a strong anti-clerical campaign and aimed at the consolidation of the nation-state. The laws were efficient because they changed both the structure and substance of education, with both serving one common purpose.

A study of the Russian education system brings out a clear-cut dichotomy, particularly visible when considering higher education, between the structure of education and its substance. Russia's case is specific because while it has always found itself under significant Western influence (starting from Peter the Great and all the way to the Bologna Process), the Soviet Union created its own centralized and government-run educational system in which structure and substance worked effectively hand in hand. The Soviet Union became a setter of standards in terms of worldwide education with roughly half of the world's population trained within Soviet type institutions [19] and a large body of students aspiring to obtain higher education in Soviet universities. With the launch of the Sputnik, fears arose in the United States that the Soviet educational system had surpassed the American one, leading to the adoption of a National Defense Educational Act in 1958, which aimed at implementing a "progressive education in the name of national security and science"<sup>4</sup>.

In the 1990s, Russia experienced a breakdown in all spheres and during this period the government implemented educational reforms copied from the West but also specifically aimed at dismantling the Soviet system judged as "ideologically impure" [20]. Every aspect of the educational process was affected, but most and foremost its structure. The main priorities of the reform were to alter the curriculum, establish institutional autonomy of educational institutions and make changes in funding. The reasons for these abrupt changes are multifold but have their roots in the ideological rejection of the previous system and lack of funding for education. Another factor was that globalization was accelerating the integration of the world's economies and Russia was afraid of being left on the sidelines. Russia accepted funds from the World Bank in the framework of such

<sup>4</sup> Watters, A. How Sputnik Launched Ed-Tech: The National Defense Education Act of 1958. URL: <http://hackededucation.com/2015/06/20/sputnik>

projects as the “Education Innovation Project” (1997–2004) and the Education Reform Project (2001–2006). This financing came with strings attached as “by rendering financial and policy assistance, international organizations often oblige governments to implement their policy advice” [21]. A vivid illustration of a profound structural change in secondary education was Russia implementing a Unified State Examination in 2000 (modeled on the American SATS) and in higher education was Russia’s decision to participate in the Bologna process. Little thought at the time went into the appropriateness of these norms for Russia and the push towards privatization, standardization and internationalization did not have the expected results. This sudden modernization was aimed at changing principally the structure but also the substance of education, and while structural reform did get implemented albeit only partially, the substance of Russian education has not changed significantly. This raises the question whether there are currently contradictions between a modernized structure and unchanged substance, but also more importantly whether the modern structure is suited to the Russian context.

### **The securitization of education**

Education appears as a tool in the hands of the State. Indeed, in many countries an organized educational system was implemented in parallel with the emergence of the nation-state. John Dewey noticed that states used education as a way to maintain and expand their political power [22] and hence it became a key part of the state national sovereignty. Allan Bloom explains the process in more detail, noting “Every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being. ... Always important is the political regime, which needs citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principles” [23, p. 26]. This quotation reflects the fact that education at all levels has an impact on society, and reveals that what the state puts in to its nation-

al educational system has a direct impact on society within the space of a generation. In this light education comes across as a security issue and foreign influence can be a matter of concern for some states. Globalization has limited the autonomy of nation-states in many issue-areas, including education and has led to “shifts in solidarities within and outside the national state” [24, p. 363]. International Organizations (IOs) underline the role the internationalization of education could play in promoting economic growth and world peace, with UNESCO noting that education can teach people how to live peacefully together. Yet, countries fear that by opening up to external pressures impacting education they may lose control of their national educational system. Characters and opinions are formed during childhood and primary and secondary school education have a life lasting impact on a person’s perception of him/herself and determines the sense of belonging to a collectivity. Higher education is all the more complex and strategic because universities are home to the country’s qualified workforce soon to join the labor market but also to house the country’s highest-level research. Universities are indeed the sources, integrators and translators of new knowledge [25]. Internationalizing a country’s educational system is complex because when a country opens up to an external influence it is hard to assess what are the driving forces behind it. The internationalization of education can have serious consequences such as security threats, loss of human capital, of research and of funding.

In Russia, the fear of external intervention is almost tangible as the country experienced an institutional and ideational void in the 1990s, during which various external actors came to play a role in internal issues.

The Soviet Union and the USA started to collaborate on educational matters as early as 1985. The Geneva Summit led to a bilateral agreement to implement student and professor exchanges, promote the learning of English in Russia and vice versa and the mutual allocation of scholarships (Joint Soviet-United States

Statement on the Summit Meeting in Geneva, 1985). The first Soviet-American private Foundation "Cultural Initiative" appeared in 1988 [26], allowing Russian researchers to receive foreign funding with no involvement of their own government [27]. These initiatives were the first in a long string, which were effected during the 1980s and especially the 1990s in partnership with the United States and a number of Western European countries. A large number of English language programs were launched in Moscow. The "open doors" policy of the 1990s led to a rapid internationalization of Russian education. The 1992 Education Act marked the beginning of the integration of Russia into the global educational system and changed the structure of education by allowing the creation of privately funded schools and universities. By the end of the 1990s, a large number of US organizations (McArthur, Ford, Carnegie etc.) had been operating in Russia, providing Russian academics with funding and research opportunities in the USA or locally [28].

These fledgling educational ties, which in the 1980s began as predominantly bilateral, intergovernmental and ostensibly reciprocal,<sup>5</sup> rapidly became lopsided and expansionist, reflecting the power shift away from Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union and under the financial pressure of economic crisis. Russia became effectively bankrupt and in need of funding for its educational system, and the USA, and more largely the West and international organizations offered funding under the condition that education was developed in Russia as they saw fit. The brain drain of Russian academics, continuing to date, has had severe repercussions for the Russian economy. While the scale of this outflow of experts is hard to assess, Russian official statistics reveal that around 35 thousand scientists left Russia in the 1990s [29]. Western initiated programs and financing ap-

pear in the long term not to have aided Russian science but to have undermined it. While a liberal would underline the benefits for Russia and the international community of these western programs, noting the brain-drain issue is a sad side-effect, a realist scholar could describe it as part of an organized strategy to deprive what was recently a rival, of its human capital.

Hence, while these initiatives in education were seemingly designed for knowledge sharing and reinforcing cooperation, they had other consequences for Russia. The country's recent history has indeed a huge impact on policy-making today in the country.

After the void and the economic crisis of the 1990s, Russia has made its sovereignty an absolute priority. The law on foreign agents operating on the territory of the Russian Federation implemented in 2012 reflects well founded fears of external actors influencing Russian academia and education among other spheres. The 1990s also explain the dichotomy between substance and structure in Russian education as the authors argue that while the Russian government wants the country to formally participate in international education including the Bologna process and benefit from the mutual recognition of qualifications among other things, it is not ready to revolutionize and internationalize the substance of education. Analyzing the content of school textbooks illustrates the differences in the substance of education. For example, while history books in schools aim at objectivity, in reality they reflect the country's perception of what happened and it is striking that while for French or British children the USA was the major factor in the Allied victory in the Second World War, for Russian children it was the Soviet Union<sup>6</sup>. When internationalizing the content of education, it can be difficult to instill in children national sentiment and patriotism. This is also the case for higher edu-

<sup>5</sup> Although the proportion of Americans who ended up learning Russian was a lot smaller than the proportion of Russian studying English.

<sup>6</sup> How WWII is Taught in Different European Countries. Part 2. OneEurope.net. URL: <http://one-europe.net/how-wwii-is-taught-in-different-european-countries-part-2>

cation. Indeed, if it is financed from abroad it no longer directly serves the interests of the State.

Russia currently faces this difficulty that while its first priority has become to protect sovereignty in education, it recognizes the ongoing need to integrate in the international education community. In the face of this challenge, Russia has adopted the approach of changing the structure of education but not its substance. Rather than being a thought-through strategy, this dichotomy between substance and structure seems to have appeared naturally, resulting from decisions made on a one-time basis. This dichotomy, while seemingly enabling Russia to integrate internationally and preserve its sovereignty in education, leads, however, to an array of problems that will be considered at length in the following section.

#### **The consequences of importing foreign norms**

When considering the reform of Russian education, several problems stand out. The first is that Russia has imported norms from abroad without adapting them to the local context and without making sure that they will lead to an improvement in the national educational system. Importing norms without the best practices and experience associated with them typically leads to them being misunderstood and incorrectly implemented. In some cases, foreign norms need to be fundamentally reviewed in order to avoid a “fundamental mismatch between teaching and schooling system design” [17, p. 14]. An anecdotal example of importing an idea indiscriminately was the fact that schools in Auckland, New Zealand were built by pioneers with “high gabled roofs so that snow [would] slide off in winter” in imitation of Scottish schools, without taking note of the fact that it never snows in that part of New Zealand. This example is particularly striking because it concerns the structure of a building, however such a lack of common sense is ubiquitous when studying the importation of norms. Russia’s adherence to the Bologna Pro-

cess, one of the most obvious manifestations of the EU’s soft power [30], was the consequence of the country aligning itself with many foreign norms relating essentially to the organization of the educational process. University education became split between Bachelor and Master levels, the ECTS credit system was introduced, Bologna-style diploma supplements started to be delivered, academic mobility was increased and mechanisms for recognition of educational credentials were created [21].

The need for these new norms was readily embraced by the government because they affected primarily or at least perceptibly the form rather than the substance of education. However, a closer analysis of the Bologna process leads to the undeniable conclusion that the process is almost inevitably bound to bring about “a revision of the content of education.” Academics have become vocal about the way the Bologna process impacts the substance of education: the academic community no longer defines “the purpose, contents, pedagogic mode of higher education [and has been] displaced by transnational policy-making networks” [7, p. 4]. Performance measurement, the organization of universities as a business, and the privatization of funding mean that universities are losing their autonomy. Also, the objective of the EU’s educational project is to make universities fit the needs of the market; with the European Commission openly stating it wants to create by the Bologna Process “the most competitive knowledge-based economy” (EC, 2003). The consequence is educational programs and research activities being strongly influenced by the market. Hence, while the management of Russian universities earlier entertained hopes that the internationalization process would offer them more freedom and flexibility, they are starting to realize that they stand to lose the limited prerogatives that they previously had while gaining nothing new [31]. The key to solving the problem may be that the Bologna process, while it officially reforms the architecture of education, can only be efficiently and productively implemented by adapting

the substance of education. The split between undergraduate and graduate education, while seemingly a formality, has important implications regarding the substance of education. A graduate on the marketplace is expected to have a different set of skills and a narrower field of expertise compared to an undergraduate. Many Russian universities, however, consider Master's degree programs simply as a continuation of Bachelor programs<sup>7</sup>. Universities cannot always see the point or afford to make the changes in the curriculum necessary to make graduate studies specific and employers often consider that undergraduates are not sufficiently qualified [32–34]. When formal norms are applied without any substantive changes occurring, the results for the educational process can be negative.

The Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100 is even more illustrative of this trend. The project has for a goal to maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market<sup>8</sup>. This is one of many top-down initiatives of the Russian government, which has for target the entry of at least five Russian universities into the top 100 of global education rankings. The nature of the goals of the project, the roadmaps and the composition of the managing Council all reflect the desire for internationalization and global recognition. The roadmaps are targeted to meet the specific criteria of rating agencies (recruiting more foreign students; mobility programs for researchers, producing world-class intellectual products etc.). Russian universities have been put in a race to fulfill international criteria, which leads to intensive copying of foreign organizational processes and structures. The risks are that universities will fo-

cus on short-time objectives, ignoring the needs of the local community and encouraging opportunistic behavior. Indeed, the desire to meet rating criteria on “international student body” could lead to lowering the admissions barrier for foreign students (for example their level of Russian), resulting in the overall deterioration of the level of education. Other drawbacks of the focus on ratings is unreasonable amounts being spent on recruiting foreign professors, the negligence of non-rated aspects of universities' activities, the underperformance of humanities universities compared to those specialized in natural sciences [35], the unreliability of the data used by the ranking agencies with their “pseudo-scientific image” [36] and the fact that rankings fail to grasp the singularities of a university [37].

To improve on their position in ratings, universities in non-Anglo-Saxon countries have started to set up programs in all disciplines taught entirely in English [38], leading to a loss of the cultural experience linked to communicating in the language of the host country. Offering English-medium courses create groundless expectations among students, that the content and format of the education dispensed will be “western”. Because of the pressure of international ratings, Russian universities are setting aside their specificities as they try to offer students standardized international programs. Rather than warning candidates upfront that what they have come abroad to experience something new, which they should seek to understand before they start to judge it, a lot of universities try to adapt ad hoc the content of education to the new imported organizational formats. The quality of education is, hence, suffering from this desire for conformity above anything else.

A striking example of implementing western standards in the sphere of education is the norms in Russia relating to university admissions. The desire to fit into the international system, to fight against corruption and to ensure equal chances led to the government abolishing entrance exams to universities and

<sup>7</sup> Vostrov, A. (2012). Adjusting to the Bologna Process. *Russia Beyond*. Sept 03. [http://rbth.com/articles/2012/09/03/adjusting\\_to\\_the\\_bologna\\_process\\_17879.html](http://rbth.com/articles/2012/09/03/adjusting_to_the_bologna_process_17879.html) (In Russ.)

<sup>8</sup> Professional development program “Internationalization in Higher Education for the 21st Century”. URL: <http://5top100.com/programs/internationalization/>



making admissions depend on the Unified State Examination results (since 2009<sup>9</sup>). While many foreign universities use the results of state examinations to select the best candidates, they keep and exercise the right to select the students they feel fit best into their institution. While Russian universities previously exercised this same freedom, the subjectivity related to this process has been largely condemned and institutions are currently required to justify numerically why one student was admitted as opposed to another.

### Resistance and pathways to productive change

Russia presents some paradoxical characteristics in the sphere of education: the westernization of education is not accompanied by its liberalization; universities are losing autonomy rather than gaining it in the face of recent reforms and the long-standing problems affecting society are still there. The top-down approach to reform in education as well as “fast-forward” approach to modernization in education [39] have brought on a host of challenges, some of which are related to an internal societal resistance to change. These “nests of resistance” were named “enclaves” to explain why in the midst of globalization and westernization, a deep-seated resistance based on traditional concepts of national identity survives [40]. In a context of changing, unclear or ill-applied legislation, informal relations retain a key importance. This is apparent in the sphere of education, where recruitment often takes place based on personal contacts rather than through a fair appeal to candidates on the labor market as noted by the QS Regional Director for Russia and the CIS<sup>10</sup>.

International norms are implemented regardless of the resistance and profound societal specificities with a stick and carrot policy leading to a phenomenon referred to as decoupling of formal and informal rules. Under-performing universities are being closed down or merged with more efficient universities, and the competition is fierce between institutions to obtain state funding, for example as part of the 5-100 project. The new western-inspired measures promoted by the project feature, inter alia, integration of practitioners into the faculty staff, the establishment of the position of “President” responsible for strategic financial management and fundraising alongside the Rector in charge of teaching and learning, as well as day-to-day running of the university. These measures also provide for the creation of marketing and brand management functions within universities. Coupled with regular external auditing of universities’ finances, it should come as no surprise that these new practices are often met with overt or latent resistance. The fact that the new measures are not welcome means that universities may mimic change instead of thoroughly implementing it, or that some key players may openly or covertly seek to sabotage the project. The concerns expressed by faculty members at Tyumen State University regarding the 5-100 project are representative for the country as a whole<sup>11</sup>. They predict a worsening of the quality and discrimination in education (creation of elite bachelors programs), a blind alignment with western norms and practices (obligation to publish in foreign journals, rumors of a foreign rector), fear for their employment security (optimizing human resources) and a wors-

<sup>9</sup> Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation of December 26, 2008 N 396 “On approval of the Procedure for admitting citizens to state and municipal educational institutions of higher education for the 2009/2010 academic year”. URL: <https://rg.ru/2009/01/23/vyzi-dok.html> (In Russ.)

<sup>10</sup> Podtserob, M. (2015). Thanks to the 5-100 program, business executives arrive at Russian universi-

ties. *Vedomosti*. February 24. URL: <http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2015/02/24/akademiki-protiv-biznesa> (In Russ.)

<sup>11</sup> A group of teachers from Tyumen State University opposed participation in Project “5-100”, the university calls their fears myth (2012). December 12. URL: <http://www.mngz.ru/tyumen/1554452-gruppa-prepodavateley-tyumgu-vystupila-protiv-uchastiya-v-livanovskoy-programme-5-100-v-vuze-nazvali-ih-opaseniya-mifami.html> (In Russ.)

ening of their material conditions. This conflict reveals some of the problems related to implementing change too rapidly [31].

W. Streeck's and K. Thelen's [41] typology of results and processes correlates the process of change (incremental or abrupt) with the result of change (continuity or discontinuity) and reveals four typical kinds of outcome. *Incremental change* in a logic of continuity results in reproduction by adaptation, while *abrupt change* in a logic of continuity results in survival and return and, hence, a failure of the adopted policy. This typology sheds a light on the Russian case, as the government chose the strategy of *abrupt change* and according to the matrix, a positive outcome is only possible if the changes take place in a logic of *discontinuity*, leading to the breakdown and replacement of the current educational system. However, the government does not aim for discontinuity, as it does not want the breakdown of the existing system and its replacement by a new one as this unavoidably presents some security and reputational risks. This typology reveals that abrupt change and continuity, which characterize the current policies, are incompatible. The threat of disturbing the current, very fragile equilibrium in higher education is to be weighed against the potential advantages of becoming a more active member of the global network of universities. In order to implement these innovations, an in-depth analysis of their potential impact on the substance of education needs to be carried out. Specifically, following the full execution of the project, what will a Russian Bachelor in political science or biology have learnt? Who will he/she aspire to work for and where? What is more, importing foreign norms without the know-how related to their implementation can be counterproductive. While Transnational Expertise and Experience Networks can play the role of a catalyst and facilitator in norm implementation by raising social and state awareness about the norms and by aiding in the adaptation of international norms to local conditions [9], more thought should go into selecting the parts of the international integration process of higher edu-

cation that Russia wishes to take part in, those it would require more time to adjust to, or, finally, those, it would rather avoid.

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### Имплементация зарубежных норм в российском высшем образовании: проблемы адаптации

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**Аннотация.** В статье анализируются причины, по которым Россия заимствует зарубежные нормы в сфере высшего образования; рассматривается, как и почему изоморфизм, транснациональные сети и глобальный рынок образования привели к необходимости интеграции страны в мировое университетское пространство. Авторы исследуют, каким образом Россия осуществляет перенос и внедрение международных образовательных норм, с одной стороны, интегрируясь в Болонский процесс и запуская такие проекты, как “5-100”, чтобы повысить конкурентоспособность своих университетов на мировой арене, а с другой – сохраняя обеспокоенность вопросами безопасности и национальной идентичности. Эти опасения приводят к тому, что правительство зачастую отдаёт приоритет соблю-

дению формальных критериев при сохранении в неизменности «идеологии» разработки образовательных программ, порождая опасную дихотомию между содержанием высшего образования и его структурным оформлением. Отмеченное несоответствие чревато не только неэффективной реализацией международной нормы, но и существенным провалом в функционировании системы высшего образования. Попытки использовать преимущества обоих «миров» оборачиваются противоположными результатами: режим форсированного «догоняющего» развития генерирует латентное сопротивление в профессиональной среде и снижает общее качество образования в тех университетах, в которых отсутствуют институты, способные амортизировать шоки от «забегания» вперед и поддерживать высокий темп перемен. Авторы очерчивают преимущества постепенной адаптации к международному опыту организации высшего образования и обосновывают необходимость приспособления международной нормы к местным условиям. Кроме того, анализируются выгоды от вовлечения в процессы адаптации норм транснациональных экспертно-профессиональных сетей.

**Ключевые слова:** российское высшее образование, изоморфизм, имплементация зарубежных норм, транснациональные сети, секьюритизация, анклав

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<b>ВЫСШЕЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ В РОССИИ</b>	<b>1,124</b>
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ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ	0,905
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УНИВЕРСИТЕТСКОЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЕ: ПРАКТИКА И АНАЛИЗ	0,751
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ALMA MATER	0,257